

Scratch

The operating theatre clock was ticking down to his personal deadline.

The elapsed time since the operation started was 03.39: all was not going well. The surgical team was tense, not good for their patient, and not good for Professor McCready. At the back of his mind he felt the pressure build, again, knew that he was stepping close to the line, again. But he had promised his playing partner Billy Burton he would be there. And he had already called off their Greensomes semi-final three times over the last month, claiming "pressure of work".

His name was 'mud' at Killie, aka Glasgow Golf Club at Killermont, on the outskirts of Bearsden.

He had heard it all, all the whispers:

"Nice guy but work obsessive."

"Needs a good wife, sort him out, show him life is not all about work."

"He'll learn, when we gather round his box after he becomes one of his own heart attack victims."

Perhaps most damning of all, from the Match Secretary:

"If he does it one more time, he's out of the Team. I am bloody-well fed up going around cap in hand at the last minute to find a Class One golfer willing to sub for him. They're all touchy as hell, those Class One guys, you know."

ooOoo

Sally looked at his long ears, narrow face, and large aquiline nose outlined under his mask. Sally was his Theatre Sister and she had been on the McCready Team, on and off, for nearly five years.

His head was down, eyes peering into magnifying lenses, behind the visor attached to the surgical helmet. This was his latest gizmo, which incorporated an array of high intensity LED's, and a video camera with a microphone. Later he would edit the resulting video material, to augment his teaching.

The visor provided a head-up display, allowing him to access the patients' records, x-rays, and MRI scans, all controlled by his eye movement. This was a new project, sponsored by Google.

The Team could follow everything on the two large LED monitors fixed on the

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far wall, above the two clocks. The upper digital display recorded time elapsed since the start of the operation. It had been started at just before eight o'clock, in the morning now gone. Below the time elapsed display the analogue clock reported the real time, which ticked by, both here and in the outside world beyond the theatre, time that could not be stopped or slowed at the whim of any man or woman, no matter how pressing a golf tie might be.

Like Malcolm Norman McCready, Sally was a keen golfer. And she was the first lady to have been elected as the "full" Club Captain at Douglas Park GC, a fully democratic club which welcomed both men and women players. Douglas Park, located in the heart of Bearsden, was less than two miles away from the exclusive Killie. She knew McCready had played at DPGC many times, but she had never played at Killie, since it was one of the last bastions of 'men only' golf in the West of Scotland.

'Forceps!'

Sally slapped the long-nosed forceps into his open palm, perhaps a tad harder than strictly necessary.

'SHORT!'

He flung the long-nosed forceps across the room, narrowly missing one of the three student observers, part of the elite group selected to worship at the altar of the great cardiovascular surgeon.

Sally slapped the short-nosed forceps into his palm. He peered down again into the cavity, hand poised, frozen.

'Em, sorry, Long, please.'

He dropped the short-nosed forceps into the dirties tray with a clatter. Sally slapped a replacement pair of long-nosed forceps into his palm.

They worked on in a silence only interrupted by his barked requests. No relaxing music for McCready. From time to time members of her Team caught her eye, mouthed requests. Sometimes she nodded, sometimes she mouthed, "Not yet", occasionally she shook her head. People left and returned only with her agreement. McCready had his head down throughout, with his long back curved over his elderly patient, like a praying mantis, she always thought.

'Tom, how are we doing?'

Tom Arbuthnot was his Consultant Anesthetist, an older, slower-witted man,

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but secure, never known to flap in a crisis. They had worked successfully together for many years, Tom becoming part of the legend, by association.

'B.P. still dropping, but slower now.'

McCready hissed, his trade-mark hiss, releasing his pent-up fury as a series of sub-aural "Bugger, bugger, bugger, bugger...".

He lifted his head, raised the visor with the back of his hand. Sally reached across and tilted up the magnifying lens to reveal his anxious dark blue eyes. They flicked to the clocks for a full sweep of the second hand. Real Time 13.38, elapsed time 04.43.

Five miles away his playing partner and his opponents would be signing in, ready for their two-forty-five tee-off. No chance of him making it now, he thought. He shut his eyes and took a long deep breath.

'Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but I'm afraid we have to go back in, do it all again. We have a "leaker", and I never trust nature to find her own solution in an eighty-three year old, no matter how fit she might otherwise be. Buckle in, please, we might be in for another four hours. Everybody on board?'

There was a quiet murmur of assent.

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It was over. Their patient was stable, off to the care of the ITU Team. McCready was in his office, writing up his notes, contemporaneously. Committing his actions immediately to words in this way was brave, something many other surgeons deliberately avoided. It was a feature of the man that Sally admired greatly.

She tidied up in the Theatre, sorted through the supplies, setting things up for the next session, chatting to the Cleaners. They were *her* Cleaners, as she thought of them, knowing that their role was crucial to a successful low infection rate for theatre operations.

She changed into a fresh gown and washed up again, prior to popping in to the ITU. Shona Walker was a good friend from the Ladies' Team at DPGC.

'Hi, Shona, how's she doing?'

'Stable, seemingly stress-free, and all her stats are improving. I think she'll get through this. Incredible, really, at eighty-three. She's your aunt, I heard, does McCready know that?'

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'Yes, she really is truly amazing. But no, I'm pretty sure he knows nothing about her as a person. But that's his style, impersonal. It's just that she was another challenge, another death's door case that no one else wanted and that the great man could not resist. It's all about McCready, really.'

'Mmmm. So, you don't know that he was here, looking at her, for ages? He just left seconds ago.'

'Oh, was he? Does he always do that?'

'Never, like you say, impersonal, before tonight. First time ever on my watch!'

'So, what did he say?'

'He said, "Sally Drucker, Not Sal Drucker? Sal Drucker, the golfing legend. Under my hands? What amazing shape for an eighty-three year old. Looks more like sixty-three. Amazing. Three time British Ladies' Champion, in her day."

Then he said, Sister, em, its Sister Walker?'

"Yes, that's me," I said, "Still Sister Walker of ITU, still here after all these years." '

"Well, please do you extra best for her, Sister Walker. Amazing."

'Then he was off, striding away like a giraffe on heat.'

'Oh, my goodness, Shona, maybe there is a real human in there after all, and not just the android we thought he was, eh?'

'Yes, in his own words, "Amazing!"'

ooOoo

It was nearly eight o'clock, more that twelve straight hours on her feet, not unusual when on the McCready Team. Now that she knew that Aunt Sal was safe, Sally was looking forward to a microwaved M&S meal for one and stretching out in front of the television.

As she exited the lift she saw him, sitting in General Reception, alone. She began to speed up, to get away from him, wary of being caught again by one of his intermittent attempts at trying to be friendly, attempts which always degenerated into a forensic re-run of the previous theatre session.

All she wanted now was to get back to her flat in Novar Drive and down a glass of chilled Sauvignon Blanc.

'Excuse me, Sister Albright, excuse me, eh, eh, excuse me.'

She gave in, whirled round on him and he barged into her, his arms sweeping around her, preventing her from falling backwards, his face inches from hers, his minty breath and his aftershave intermingling with her perfume.

'Well, Professor McCready, you certainly know how to sweep a girl off her feet!'

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'Oh, yes, my... yes, sorry about that'

They were apart now but still close. His hands had moved, his fingers clutching her upper arms, squeezing gently, absent mindedly. She liked it. His dark blue eyes were confused, then twinkling, smiling back as she giggled.

'Am I under arrest?'

'Oh, sorry, sorry, I didn't...

'And what was it that impelled you to bowl me over, Professor McCready?'

'Call me Norman, or rather Norm, if that's all right with you?'

'Oh, we all thought you were Malcolm! That's what everyone calls you, do they not?'

'To Officialdom, yes, but to family and close friends I'm "Norm", if you like. And you're Sally, right?'

'Norm it is then. Well Norm, I'm Sally D. Albright to officialdom, but I'm just "Sal", to family and close friends.'

'"Sal"? Does your "D" stand for "Drucker", by any chance?'

'Yes, she's my Gran's sister, my great aunt. *Amazing!*, don't you think?'

He laughed out loud at her use of his word. For the first time in the five years she had known him he seemed at last to be a true human being. This near to six foot tall, serious, angular, awkward, taciturn, obnoxious genius of a man, with magical healing hands, the man that she had tholed for so long, had suddenly become a lanky, laughing, boyish imp.

'So, you've been talking to Sister Walker, then?'

'Guilty, mi Lord!'

'Look, I'm really sorry about that, today, the forceps thing. I promise it will never happen again. Never! It was an unforgiveable lapse in concentration. Never, honestly, never.'

'You are forgiven, Norm. And thanks for what you did for Auntie. Do you think she will get back to playing golf soon? It's become her life again, since Uncle Thomas died three years ago. She got her handicap back down to seven, just before her heart attack. Now that is *amazing, yes?*'

'It is, and yes, I'm fairly sure she will be 'made as new'. As you will have seen, the heart itself is healthy. It was just the usual suspects, her arteries. But really, it's a team thing. We need everyone committed with us, Surgical, ITU, Medical, then OT and their post-op exercise team. And of course our Patients, they've got to want it too, be brave enough to re-gain their lives. Agreed?'

'Yes, but getting lucky, getting on McCready's list, is the best start of all. And that, statistically, is a fact.'

'Mmmm, thanks. So, well, that's that done. I'd best not detain you further. Home to hubby, is it?'

'No, no hubby, yet.'

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'Oh, I thought you must be. Well, eh. Err.'

'So, what about you, Norm? Is there someone out, fuming and scraping food onto the dog's plate again?'

'Me? Married? Who on Earth would have me?'

She took her chance.

'So, no wife then. But are you hungry? Fancy a bite to eat? I know a good place, quite near.'

'Oh, near here? Is there any place worth eating at near here?'

'One Devonshire?'

'On a Friday night? We'd never get in, no chance, surely?'

'Even if my sort of cousin, Declan Drucker, is the Maître D?'

'Is he?'

'Let's go!'

Sal Drucker Albright looped her arm through that of Malcom Norm McCready. They lopped off on their long legs into drizzle, heading for the famous eatery, less than ten minutes' walk from Gartnavel Hospital.

The rain was nearly passed now. It had been raining hard since a few minutes before eight o'clock that morning, just as McCready and his Team started the clock on Sal Drucker.

The Greens at Killie had become water-logged and at noon the Course had been closed to play. Effectively McCready's semi-final tie had been rained off and no blame had accrued to him for his non-appearance. There was a message on his iPhone to tell him this, but he had not yet opened it, and was still unaware. All he knew for certain was that this tall slim girl with the gurgling giggle might be the one for him, if she would have him.

ooOoo

It was nearly eleven o'clock. They had just finished their deserts, both choosing dangerous sticky toffee puddings with clotted cream.

He suggested coffee and liqueurs at his place, at Kelvin Court, a top-floor apartment with fantastic views out to the Campsie Hills, he claimed.

Who could tell what might ensue?

Sal Drucker Albright's heart was singing. And her lips were humming one of her Mum's favourite tunes. "Strangers in the Night...."

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As they strode back to his place a thought occurred.

'Norm, would you be free for a round at Douglas Park, tomorrow, weather permitting?'

'But you have a Gent's Medal, Billy said, he's a member at Douglas Park as well as Killie, because of Susie.'

'Billy Burton? We could ring him, see if he fancies a Four-Ball with Susie at say, three o'clock, Guys against Gals? Then we could have a bite together in the Clubhouse afterwards. Lisa and her Catering Team do great food. What do you say?'

'You could get a tee time?'

'The Captain of the Club can tee off whenever she wants. Anyway, I bet after this rain there will be lots of call-offs. The timids will want to protect their handicaps. So, is that a yes?'

'Yes, great idea. Sal, what do you play off?'

'Scratch, Norm, just like you!'